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ABSTRACT

E. D. Hirsch's call for authoritative knowledge about composition is flawed, according to this document, because he focuses on the product and not the process of composing, thereby excluding more of the problem of composition than he includes. Hirsch's principle of readability--that styles that communicate meaning with less effort from the reader are better--provides him with a rationale for guiding research and instruction and with the basis for objective standards for evaluators themselves. Readability may be important, but not as important as Hirsch thinks. He puts too much emphasis on revising and editing meaning that is "already there," and on seeing all student problems as ignorance that can be cured by the acquisition of knowledge about readability. In fact, Hirsch's kind of instruction in readability itself seems to be the source of many student writing problems. Since most students can already write readable prose in some situations, the task of English instruction is to help students extend their capacity to write for new purposes. Composition is probably closer to dialogue than to Hirsch's model of forensic speech, and Hirsch's emphasis on rules, maxims, and readability reveals what is missing at the center of his philosophy--students and their learning needs. The complexity of the language process and the often tacit nature of learning reveal that teachers should create contexts that give students the best chance to acquire skills, not lay down rules. (JL)

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False Fruits of Knowledge:
A Rebuttal to Hirsch on Composition and Pedagogy

I. THE LIMITS OF AUTHORITATIVE KNOWLEDGE

In The Philosophy of Composition (University of Chicago, 1977), E.D. Hirsch has once again devoted himself to rescuing our profession from absurdity by providing us with intellectually authoritative principles to guide our pedagogical and scholarly practice[1] -- this time in the field of composition. The major underlying theme of his book is that the principal obstacle to improved instruction in composition and the source of our profession's embarrassing record of failure has been the absence among us of what he calls "authoritative knowledge." By this he means knowledge based on verifiable scientific research. "The neglect of basic research in composition," he says, "has encouraged us to be our own oracles in the classroom," (p. 6) dependent on our own inadequate knowledge and on textbooks whose "gravest flaw" like ours "is their lack of genuine authority" (p. 166). However, Hirsch allows, neither we nor the authors of our texts are entirely to blame for

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our ignorance, since "some of the relevant knowledge about composition lies scattered in a number of fields, and the rest does not yet exist" (p. 166). Time and advances in research, he assures us, will correct the current defects in our knowledge. Meanwhile, we can benefit from the helpful perspective that his own research now offers:

> If really authoritative guidance were available most of us would follow it, and be less inclined to grasp desperately at each new "approach" that comes along. I believe that our lack of authoritative knowledge has created more conflicts among us than all our differences in taste and ideology. This book does not pretend to provide that authoritative and encompassing knowledge, but in offering the fruits of several years of research, it does aim to encourage a conviction that we <u>can</u> gain that authoritative knowledge within a decade (p. 6).

No one can fault Hirsch for his awakening (and awakening us) to the large body of composition-related research being conducted in fields outside of English and rhetoric -- particularly in psychology, psycholinguistics, and reading. Nor is there anything wrong with his wanting to see instruction better informed by the results of systematic inquiry into the phenomenon of composition and its pedagory. Yet, <u>something</u> feels more authoritarian than authoritative about Hirsch's view on what we need. And it involves more than his inclination to misuse research by looking to it for guidance rather than insight.

It is self-evident that the task of the composition teacher is to help

students learn to engage more effectively in the process of composing or writing -- a process that yields compositions as a product. The most useful research for teachers of composition will therefore serve to illuminate the composing process and the problems of learning to engage in it. It will focus, for example, on how the process works, what its components are, what skills it entails, and how these are acquired and related to other linguistic and intellectual skills.

In recent years such researchers as Janet Emig, James Britton, and Britton's colleagues in the London Institute Writing Group[2] have conducted extensive inquiries into just such difficult questions. Their research has yielded not so much answers as insights -- insights that enrich and clarify our vision of both the composing and learning processes. Hirsch makes no mention of their work at all, apparently because they do not offer us anything authoritative "to follow" in our teaching. What we get from them instead is a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the interior experience of our students as they engage in composition and in learning its component skills.

To say that additional research of any kind over the next ten years will provide us the "authoritative and encompassing knowledge" we need to resolve any of our important conflicts over how to teach composition is like saying that additional research over the next decade in child development will give us the authoritative and encompassing knowledge we need in order to know how to raise our children. Composition conceived of as a process (as Emig, Britton and others have defined it) is a phenomenon that is virtually inseparable from the complex of discoursive and intellectual operations that

consitute it. We can no more solve the problem of teaching and learning such a process than we can solve the problem of understanding the people who are trying to learn it.

The success of Hirsch's approach, however -- what allows him to promise and deliver authoritative knowledge about composition -- derives from the fact that he defines the subject of his inquiry very narrowly. Instead of trying to gain insight into the complex and slippery process of composing, Hirsch settles for answers about the more stable and observable phenomenon of the product -- the written artifact itself. The only process he examines is that of reading, and then it is to provide us with information on the features of prose (and how to evaluate it) rather than on the composing of it. His focus throughout remains on the language of writing rather than the writing of language.

To recognize the narrow focus of Hirsch's philosophy is to wonder if he presents us with a view that ignores more of the problem of composition than it includes. There is no doubt that his theory of composition is thorough in its research, compelling in its logic, and persuasive as a solution to the problems of instruction and evaluation. Its limitation is that it distorts the dimensions of those problems by reducing them to manageable terms -- that is, to terms that are subject to solution through the kinds of authoritative knowledge Hirsch is prepared to offer. What we end up with, then, is a philosophy of composition built on the logic of the boy who, having lost a coin in the street at night, looks for it across the road from where he dropped it because that's where the streetlight is.

II. THE THEORY IN SUMMARY

Not that Hirsch ignores the process of composing altogether; it's just that he claims that the only way to discover what is essential to that process is to look for it in the distinctive features of what he calls "written speech" (including public address) as opposed to "oral speech." Once we understand the character of such speech, Hirsch asserts, we will be able to deduce from it a set of principles which may be translated into an appropriate curriculum for any instructional program designed to improve a student's skill in composition. Hirsch summarizes his reasoning on this matter at the end of his first chapter. Here, he refutes his own version of Bloomfield's notion that written speech is secondary to oral and merely an instrument for its representation.[3] Then he shows how the written form of any language is largely an independent speech system or "grapholect" for a mode of discourse that makes distinctive pragmatic demands on speakers by virtue of its isolation from the situational contexts in which oral speech ordinarily occurs. Finally, in an overview of the remainder of his book, he articulates the essential logic for his whole argument:

> To sum up, the absence of actual persons, speaking in actual contexts, requires the creation of implied persons speaking in implied contexts. This eccentricity of written speech creates problems which cannot be solved by the ablest of native speakers without practice and instruction. That is why one needs to be <u>taught</u> composition in one's own language. That is also why effective prose was not full-grown within the history of any language of which we possess records.

> First, the scribal, lexical, and syntactic conventions of a normative written dialect had to be established -- the subject of Chapter 2. Next, stylistic solutions to the problem of writing effectively for a large readership had to be learned and gradually established. This process will be the subject of Chapter 3. Hidden within this historical process, traceable in all modern written languages, may be discovered the underlying principles of composition. These principles, once established, may be codified; once they are codified, their rudimentary application may be taught and learned with ever greater efficiency on the basis of research which, one dares to hope, will yield ever greater agreement on the nature and best application of these principles (pp. 31-32).

The "underlying principles of composition" which Hirsch wrings out of his historical and psycholinguistic examination of prose become subsumed by an even more essential unifying principle to which he devotes the last two-thirds of his book. It is what he calls the principle of "communicative efficiency" or "relative readability." This is no more or less than a principle of style which holds that "one prose style is better than another when it communicates the same meaning as the other does, but requires less effort from the reader"(p. 9). On this principle Hirsch erects his entire philosophy of composition. It provides him with a rationale for guiding research and instruction and with the basis for objective standards for evaluating writing, writing instruction, and finally even the competence of the evaluators themselves.

Hirsch notes that his is not an entirely new idea, but a reformulation of one first articulated by the British philosopher, Herbert Spenser, in 1852. In an essay on "The Philosophy of Style," Spenser tried to reduce all the maxims of rhetoric to a single principle of "economy" or"least mental effort." The problem with Spenser's formulation, says Hirsch, is that it did not make sufficiently clear a consideration that he nonetheless appreciated (and one which is central to Hirsch's earlier hermeneutic theorizing): that the meaning of an utterance includes all of its intended rhetorical effects. Thus, the economy of the mental effort required to apprehend any given utterance cannot be measured without accounting for all the effects the utterance is intended to produce. Hirsch's term, "relative readability" explicitly reminds us that "readability" -- the principle of least effort -- is relative to the full complex of semantic intentions that underly any utterance. It is therefore a principle of value "that is tolerant of every conceivable semantic intention" and every aesthetic preference. Intentional elegance, intentional obscurity, and intentional lucidity are equally governed by the principle" (p. 9).

Hirsch also claims that his principle is grounded in linguistic history and the psychology of human perception. The psychological-historical argument goes like this: There is an irrisistible universal tendency for all language change to move toward greater communicative efficiency (a premise some linguists would challenge). All prose, including English prose, seems to show this same progressive tendency. (Hirsch demonstrates this through an ingenious comparative analysis of prose selections from various periods.) Readability may therefore be said to represent an historically sanctioned standard of value for all written discourse.

Hirsch then shows how the historical changes that may be observed in the conventions governing written discourse serve to economize the reader's attention in conformity to a psychological rule Spenser had intuited to justify his argument for efficiency as the goal of rhetoric. Spenser's premise was that at any given moment a reader has only a limited amount of mental energy to give to the task of apprehending an utterance, so that, in his own words: "the more time and attention it takes to receive and understand each sentence, the less time and attention can be given to the contained idea; and the less vividly will that idea be conceived" (p. 78).

Following Spenser's intuition that a theory of composition must rest on a theory of reading, Hirsch looks for the underlying principles for effective writing in the psychology of a reader's transaction with a text. This remains, however, an imperfectly understood phenomenon, representing a fairly new field of research. It is also a field that is largely dependent on more general research in information processing, the psychology of memory, and the psychology of language reception. Undaunted, Hirsch surveys and summarizes the relevant research in all of these fields and comes up with findings that will fascinate anyone interested in the teaching of literacy.

He shows us, for example, how and why efficiency in language reception is related to the predictability of the elements in an utterance, and how uncertainty may be reduced by such techniques as that of increasing the constraining power of sentence beginnings. He shows too how the limitations of the short-term memory and its capacity to hold on to no more than about five separate items of perception, make the unitizing of semantic and syntactic elements and the rapid closure of clauses important to readability.

Aside from some possible technical confusions in his discussion (at one point he treats sentences as propositions, uses the technical term "argument" to refer to verbs, and allows for a confusion between word tokens and "word-concepts"; see especially pp. 126-127), Hirsch provides us with a useful systhesis of an impressively wide range of research literature -- even if it doesn't finally yield much in the way of new rules we might follow for the improvement of our prose. What it mainly does provide are psycholinguistic explanations for the choices that competent writers intuitively make. These are the choices that textbooks have always tried to teach in the form of practical rhetorical maxims -- what I.A. Richards once dismissed as "the usual postcard's-worth of crude common sense."[4]

Hirsch is entirely disposed to what Richards scorns, and goes so far as to insist that it is mainly the maxims rather than their underlying technical principles that composition teachers should teach. The utility of his research, as he sees it, is that it makes it possible for us to know which maxims are authoritative. In this spirit he compares the maxims offered by five highly respected composition handbooks (Strunk and White, McCrimmon, Crews, Lucas, and Gowers), and finds them remarkably in agreement and reducible to the same nine principles. All of these principles, moreover (avoid jargon, keep to the point, be simple and concrete, etc.) turn out to be sustained by the same deeper principles of readability that Hirsch educes from the rest of his research.

III. A CRITIQUE OF THE CENTRAL ARGUMENTS, WITH A NEW VIEW OF THE GOOD OLD CAUSE

However much we may want to object to particular points in what Hirsch calls his "cumulative argument" (and many readers will object to his elabor-

ately rationalized argument in his second chapter, that written speech is intolerant of non-standard dialects), I can think of no good reason for contradicting his central claim that the history of prose style and the psycholinguistic constraints involved in reading both point to relative readability as an inherent principle for an ideology of literacy. Moreover, as a criterion for measuring the communicative effectiveness of any prose style (and Hirsch gives his whole last chapter to showing how readability tests can finally provide us with a truly objective basis for grading papers and for student placement), readability is surely no more objectionable than the desideratum of efficiency is in any other context.

To acknowledge that much, however, does not mean that one must subscribe to a philosophy of composition which holds that readability and the rules that govern it define the <u>essential</u> subject for study in the discipline of composition, either as an area of research or as a subject to be taught and learned in English classes. In other words, we don't have to think that the problem of readability is irrelevant to the teaching of composition in order to see the perversity of Hirsch's insistence that it is nearly everything:

> ... unless it were possible for a revised text to convey the same meaning as the original in a more readable way, we would not need to teach a student how to write readable prose. The student who protests that he <u>did</u> say what he meant would be right and the teacher of composition would close up shop. What the ideal teacher of composition does teach is a skill that enables his students to convey their meanings efficiently. Persuasiveness, clarity, elegance may be parts of the student's semantic intentions, or they may not.

> Such qualities are not universal qualities of readable prose because they are not universal semantic intentions for all writers at all times. The composition teacher is not by profession a tyrant who tells his students what they ought to mean, though he may consider such instruction a secondary pedagogical duty (p. 87).

Here, then, is a philosophy of composition that amounts to no more than a rhetoric of revision. Or less. Of the three stages that are conventionally said to constitute the composing process -- pre-writing, writing, and re-writing -- Hirsch has presumed to build his entire philosophy around the third, and then largely on the intellectually least important and least interesting component of that third, a part we usually identify separately as "editing."

Roughly speaking, we may say that revision (or "re-writing" or "reformulation") is of two kinds. There is the revision that belongs to the process of invention (to use an older rhetorical term) -- to the writer's discovery of what his thoughts are or what the semantic intention is that he wants to express and will later edit. Then there is the revision that Hirsch focuses on -- a process that seeks to make the writer's already-known semantic intention more easily apprehended by a reader. That is, editing -- a matter of tinkering with the surface structure of an utterance.

Of course, we actually do both kinds of revising at every stage in the composing process. Indeed, there is probably no stage that fails to include all the others, though there is an overall kind of progression in our writing whereby in stages different parts of the process seem to predominate. When we are writing what we will later refer to as our first draft, we are mainly

discovering our ideas -- pausing and revising as we write largely in the interest of finding out what we want to say. In this stage, we also pause to revise for the sake of the surface appearance of our final draft -- for the sake of decorum and the ease of our reader. Such attentions to our reader are unproductive at this stage, however, to the degree that they distract us from our more important task of discovering exactly what we are trying to say. On the other hand, such editing is entirely appropriate to the last stage of composing when, having discovered and articulated for ourselves (though a process that has already included pre-writing, writing, and re-writing) what we want to say, we revise again, but this time mostly for the sake of the surface appearance of our composition. Yet even here we often find ourselves reconsidering and sharpening our sense of what our idea is.[5]

In whatever way one finally chooses to talk about the stages of the composing process, it appears that for Hirsch composition as a subject for instruction and research is just about limited to that part of revision that is editing and that is subsequent to a writer's completed discovery of his meaning. Hence, Hirsch can assert that unless composition instruction is devoted to teaching students how to revise their prose to make it more readable, the student who professes that his essay says what he means would have to be believed (since "meaning" for Hirsch is "intended meaning") and the composition teacher would have to close up shop. Tyrants, not composition teachers, says Hirsch, tell students what they ought to mean.

Teachers of remedial and basic skills in many high schools and junior colleges may regard the reductivist focus of Hirsch's philosophy as a kind of put-on,completely out of touch with the academic world many English

teachers inhabit. The illiteracy that troubles teachers most in their sublunary classrooms is not the kind that can produce a piece of written discourse that might then be revised and edited for greater readability. To be able to engage a piece of prose at that level would mark the end of instruction for many teachers -- not its beginning. These teachers may also find it amusing that when Hirsch finally gets around to examining an actual piece of prose that might be made more readable, he takes it not from some barely literate freshman composition, but from An Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method by M. Cohen and E. Nagel. And the passage he quotes (p. 87) is, of course, hardly unreadable or even very clumsy. It is merely one that might be made more readable, as might many of the sentences I have settled for here in this essay.

Not that it would be difficult to demonstrate that many students write prose that is unsatisfactory in the sense that it is insufficiently readable. The question is whether they fail to write more readable prose because they lack knowledge (either tacit or explicit) about the principles of readability. It is easy for any of us to perform more poorly than we know how. It's not so easy to figure out why. Britton and his colleagues report what most teachers have observed: that students tend to write well when they are involved in their writing tasks and poorly when they are not. A student who performs an assigned task perfunctorily will seem to possess a lower level of linguistic and discoursive skill than the same student will when he is more involved in his writing.[6] Preferring authoritative solutions, Hirsch tends to see poor student performances in writing as symptoms of the students' ignorance -- symptoms that can be cured through proper doses of knowledge. Instruction is for him a problem in the transmission of knowledge

rather than in the psychology of learning.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Hirsch's approach to instruction is not only unresponsive to the learning needs of seriously "remedial" students, but that it is largely superfluous for most students. I mean even for the great body of average students on whose behalf it has become fashionable to call for instructional reform. Is there any reason for us to believe that these students are incapable of writing <u>any</u> readable prose? And even if they have never written it, are we to believe that their need is for more authoritative knowledge about the principles of readability?

For a number of years Ken Macrorie and Peter Elbow, among others,[7] have been pointing out that most students, including average high school and college students, are likely to write literate, highly readable, vital, and even eloquent and graceful prose when they are freed from the constraints that typically prevent them from doing so. Nor do these constraints have anything to do with the necessary differences between oral and written speech, though they frequently have much to do with the anxieties students experience about constraints they mistakenly <u>think</u> they are supposed to observe (what Dale Adams has called the "pedagogenic basics"[8]). In fact, what the experience of many of the most successful composition teachers in high schools and colleges suggests is that many students write unreadable prose largely because they have had too much of the kind of instruction that Hirsch's focus on readability would only encourage. One effect of such instruction is that from it many students learn to be hyper-critical about their prose. They become what Don Stoen and Ross Winterowd call "scribal stutterers"[9] -- unable to achieve in their writing the linguistic fluency

and grace of which they would be capable if they were more comfortable in the process of composing. They are blocked in their writing (and in their thinking) because they are too anxious to tune into the prose rhythms that are natural to their own speech. These rhythms are part of the stylistic repertoire they have acquired through reading and listening to written speech in quite the same way that they learned to communicate effectively in oral speech through practice in ordinary daily verbal transactions.

If our experience shows us that our students are capable of producing effective written speech in particular discourse situations with particular sets of semantic intentions, it follows that the difficulty they experience in writing effectively in other contexts and with other intentions is not mainly a matter of their ignorance of how to produce readable prose. Their problem must be that they are unable to activate their competence to produce such prose in the service of unfamiliar or uncongenial discursive tasks. Hirsch himself observes that "a student who can write well in one genre can quickly learn to write well in another. He possesses a general proficiency that is transferable to many different genres" (p. 149). The task of composition instruction is not then, as Hirsch claims, to teach students to write readable prose; they already have the linguistic capacity to do that. It is to teach them to extend their capacity to write it for new purposes. More specifically, in the context of the English class the aim of our instruction must be to help our students learn to use their discursive resources in more intellectually demanding and productive ways. That is, to use composition as a means of thinking more penetratingly, more clearly, and more critically than they are likely to have before about any subject that warrants intellectually serious attention.

This does not mean that composition teachers must be tyrants who dictate the content of their students' thoughts. It means only that the composition teacher's principal responsibility is to help his students learn to use their discourse competence for the most penetrating and insightful thinking of which they are capable at any moment. To use one's language competence in such a fashion defines the activity of composition in so far as it is a humane discipline, which is to say an instrument for inquiry and intellectual growth.

This has, in fact, been the focus of instruction for generations of teachers who have argued in the tradition of Plato's refutation of the sophists that composition is more essentially an instrument for learning rather than a manipulative skill for persuasion or for the display of knowledge. For such teachers, composition is a means by which we take conscious possession of ideas or feelings that are already in us, but that remain unavailable to us until we discover and articulate them in coherent language. Many teachers despair over the possibility of teaching students to write better because it requires teaching them to think better (to be more intelligent than they are). The discipline of composition, properly conceived, however, actually does teach students to think more intelligently, in the sense that they learn to use their language to make more of their own intelligence present to themselves.

Here, I may seem to drawing a distinction without a difference. What I am calling the writer's discovery of his ideas may be no more than what Hirsch would call the writer's readable expression of his semantic intention. The writer's capacity to discover his thoughts, Hirsch might say, is

merely a function of his success at expressing them efficiently. The writer is, after all, the first reader of his own prose.

This is not an argument, however, to which Hirsch's Philosophy is hospitable. Hirsch focuses on composition as a product and body of knowledge. He ignores the intellectual value of composition as a process and as an instrument for the writer's own learning. He insists at every point that composition is a skilled operation (representing knowledge) performed on a meaning that is already known to the writer, and that only needs to be recast in its most readable form. It is readability relative to whatever semantic intention a writer wishes to communicate that is the business of composition instruction, says Hirsch. Even a desire to be clear, he says, may or not be part of a writer's semantic intention.

Here I must add that my argument with Hirsch does not depend upon my arbitrarily granting a priveleged status to only one use of composition from among a theoretically much larger list of its possible real-world functions. I am defining instead what is essential to the process of composing that accounts for the status of composition as an intellectual discipline and for our traditional claim that it is an indispensable part of a liberal education. In this context, whatever communicative purpose or hierarchy of purposes may be assigned to any act of composition, the process of composing -- to the degree that it is intellectually responsible -- entails the discovery and clarification of the utterer's meaning as he articulates it for himself. If it is not an intellectually responsible act of composing, then it is by definition a faulty one.[10]

From this perspective, composition or the act of composing may be thought

of as something like a "speech act" (as the language philosophers use that term[11]) at the level of a whole discourse. We might even invent a class of utterances that we could call "discourse acts" in which composing would be the quintessential act falling at the extreme end of a spectrum that begins with "making small talk" and might include "showing off" and "conning." My point is that composition as an act involving semantic intentions and discoursive functions may serve a variety of secondary or sub-purposes -- rhetorical or otherwise -- but that it must be regarded as defective or infelicitous in so far as any ulterior purpose subverts its essential function as an act and process devoted to the truthful illumination and clarification of thought.

To say this is to reject the first premise of Hirsch's Philosophy of Composition by arguing that composition differs from other forms of language behavior less significantly by virtue of the verbal conventions that distinguish written from oral speech than by its distinctive intellectual and ethical function. From this point of view, a student's spiritless but conventionally correct essay on his summer vacation written merely as an act of classroom obedience may provide a less felicitious, less authentic model for the act of composition than a transcription of the private oral speech of two intellectually serious people engaged in an authentic dialogue.

Dialogue may, in fact, describe the social transaction which composition ideally enacts, even more than the model of forensic speech that Hirsch and most rhetoricians propose. That is because a dialogue may ordinarily be said to be genuine to the degree that each speaker speaks not to affect another, and not even for the other, but for himself to the other, making

himself (his thoughts, his inner self) present to the other through an act of self-revelation -- an act not so much requiring special linguistic skills as the spiritual skills of courage, trust, love, and generosity.

Of course, it would seem preseumptuous if English teachers actually spoke of their responsibility as including the teaching of moral virtues. It is nonetheless unavoidably the case that in the teaching of composition one is teaching what is fundamentally an ethical or moral act. If we reflect on what troubles us the most in our students' writing, we will realize that it isn't so much the unreadable quality of their prose or the superficiality of their thinking. It is rather the state of mind or spirit of which these defects are merely the visible signs. Consider how it is possible for a native-speaking college freshman -- one with an excellent high school record and high scores on college entrance tests -- to produce the following sentences in an essay written at home for a regular freshman composition class:

> Society is a very influencing aspect with the development and shaping of our lives. Society has its general ideas and rules, and they too are very influencing.

The student who wrote this monstrous passage did not do so because she hadn't been taught the proper maxims for writing readable prose. What good could such maxims have done her? It is true, of course, that some of the defects of her prose may be superficially attributed to her violations of some of the commonplace maxims that Hirsch finds to be authoritative, for example, "use appropriate words" and "use vivid and lively language." But who would want to do otherwise? Would any student deliberately choose to

use words that are inappropriate or language that is inexpressive and dead?

There is only one way that a student might, and that is if he is committed to such language as a consequence of his deeper commitment to a language act for which such language is appropriate. No native speaker of English could write or speak such sentences as these I have cited unless he did so out of a corrupt semantic or discoursive intention. Such sentences get written only when a writer is trying harder to sound smart, to impress his reader, to camouflage his own intelligence, then to discover and reveal what he is thinking. The corrective for such a student is not to teach him the rules for writing readable prose. It is to help him learn what prose can do for him intellectually and what his moral obligations are as a writer -- especially in the intellectual community into which his college education seeks to conduct him.[12] He must learn the value of seeking and telling the truth, of using his writing to discover, clarify, and reveal his thoughts. He must learn the value of taking the risks that are involved in exposing his thought processes and in trusting his readers to care about his thinking. To so trust and to take such risks requires courage -- a courage that his teachers can help him to find by treating his prose and his thinking respectfully, which means first that they must refuse to treat inauthentic and compromised acts of composition as if they were genuine.

IV. THE PSYCHOLINGUISTIC BASES FOR A COUNTER-THEORY

It is not entirely clear how Hirsch would have the psycholinguistic rules he uncovers for readability translated into instructional materials or practices. At the beginning of his book he insists that the rules for readability must be codified so that their "rudimentary application can be taught and

learned" (p. 32). Whether that means that the rules themselves must be taught as rules or only their application in the form of practical maxims is uncertain. In his chapter on instruction he says first that "We need to teach genuine principles of composition ... the principles behind the maxims" (p. 148). A page later, he sensibly acknowledges that those principles may be too abstract and that "it might be the case that writing might be taught more efficiently if the teacher knew the principles behind the maxims."

The problem with maxims, as I have already suggested, is that they can't do anyone any good unless he happens to have already acquired the deeper knowledge that they represent (a knowledge which Hirsch insists from the outset our students cannot be expected to have acquired without expert direct instruction based upon authoritative knowledge of the kind that has heretofore not been available to our profession). What good can it do to tell a floundering writer to keep to the point, to use vivid and lively language, to be economical? One might as well tell him to be witty or elegant or wise. If he knew how to do or be these things, he would do them, or at least be trying to. Hirsch himself points out, moreover, that even the wisest of maxims are not applicable universally and absolutely, but only in relation to particular semantic intentions -- intentions that he unwisely claims are not the proper business of the composition teacher. Finally, if teaching the appropriate maxims were the key to effective instruction in composition, the discipline would not be in the lamentable state in which Hirsch finds it. If his research demonstrates anything convincingly, it is that the maxims most commonly taught and emphasized by composition texts and teachers are substantially in agreement with each other,

as well as consistent with the same underlying principles of readability that Hirsch derives from his extensive study in the psycholinguistics of reading.

Perhaps part of Hirsch's point, then, is to show us that composition instruction, as it is conventionally practiced, is not nearly as ill-informed as most of us have lately been hearing. This seems, in fact, a plausible conclusion to draw from Hirsch's chapter on instruction. Not only does his research show that the most conventionally taught maxims are authoritative, but he ends up advocating the very same instructional practices that are most characteristic of college composition courses throughout the country. He thinks it appropriate for direct instruction to occur largely in the form of comments on student papers, and for students to do most of their learning as they attempt to revise or write new papers while keeping their teachers' criticisms in mind. The only way in which he challenges conventional teaching practice is by questioning the degree to which the comments instructors make on student papers are authoritative -- that is, consistent with what research reveals about readability. And his answer is that they are authoritative, especially in so far as they represent the most commonplace maxims for writing effective prose.

Are there any inappropriate maxims then -- maxims which Hirsch's research shows ought to be excised from the repertoire of an English teacher's comments on student papers? With one exception, apparently not. The exception -- the only widely employed maxim Hirsch tries to discredit -- is the one that admonishes students "to write naturally, as they speak." This Hirsch regards as "Bloomfieldian advice," invalid because it "overlooks the

functional distinctions between speech and writing" (p. 7). And this brings us back to the center of what seems to be missing in Hirsch's philosophy of composition -- the students.

Are we serious, to think that any literate teacher has ever advised his students to write as they speak, when what he meant was that they should ignore the differences between kinds of speech or between the ordinary stream of casual speech (large chunks of which are frequently not even segmented into words) and the conventional structure of written discourse? A teacher who advises his students to write as they speak is surely advising them instead to use their native linguistic competence in the service of their own intelligence -- to not cancel out that intelligence by putting all their attention on trying to sound like someone else -- like a writer twenty years their senior whom they think they are supposed to sound like if they are to be taken seriously as thinkers. It may also be a piece of advice that a teacher would give to a student who has become paralyzed by his fear of errors and who is so hyper-critical of his own language and sentence-making capacity that he has lost his fluency in writing. It is a piece of advice, in short, that is addressed to the learning needs of students and arises out of a teacher's attention to the particular obstacles that students face as they attempt to articulate their ideas in prose. I offer a similar piece of advice to my own students by urging them to "try to sound as dumb as you are." Such advice will often help my students (and me) to write more readable prose, when we find ourselves getting caught up in our anxieties about not being bright enough or learned enough to say what we think without pretention -- that is, without trying to disguise our own voices to make our ideas sound more important and learned than they are.

These are not maxims whose authority is subject to validation by any study of the linguistics of readable prose or the psycholinguistics of language retrieval. They are instead valid to the degree that they help students overcome obstacles to effective writing. They are authoritative to the degree that they penetrate insightfully into the processes involved in composing.

The instructional focus of Hirsch's book, however, is not on the process of composing and finally not on maxims either. It is rather on those features of written language that conventional rhetorical maxims seem to commend. What Hirsch's philosophy implicitly advocates, therefore, in addition to the teaching of maxims, is the teaching of rules or principles which describe readable prose as if they constituted a body of knowledge prerequisite for producing it.

Yet even if the principles of readability which Hirsch seeks to codify do represent what a competent writer may be said to know, in the sense that they describe the underlying rules for the choices he makes in revising his prose, such rules remain merely descriptive of the writer's knowledge, not equivalent to it. They don't account for what he actually learned in acquiring the competence that produces the choices he makes. They merely describe the rules he appears to be obeying in behaving as he does.

A skilled writer's stylistic competence may be thought of as analogous to a native speaker's linguistic competence. The rules for a speaker's grammar, in so far as they may be educed through linguistic research, may be said to represent or describe the linguistic competence which allows the speaker to produce well-formed sentences in his language. But even if the complete grammar of any native speaker's language could be codified (and this has never been achieved or even nearly so for any natural language), it would not rep-

resent the structure of the speaker's acquisition of his competence. It would represent instead the structure of the knowledge which may be said to describe that competence. In other words, the knowledge representing a speaker's linguistic competence is not what he actually learned in order to become competent; nor can it be said to describe what is actually the interior possession of a competent speaker. It is, rather, a model by which we can objectify his interior knowledge and thereby (to the degree that the model is accurate) formulaically reproduce utterances which meet the criteria for well-formedness presupposed by our model.

Now, we may want to ask, what's wrong with trying to discover and teach a model or set of rules a writer might use for producing readable sentences or making less readable ones more readable? For one thing, even if stylistic rules sufficient to revise <u>in more than trivial ways</u> may be established through research, the writer who adheres to such rules is not so much himself a competent writer as someone doing an impersonation of a competent writer. A competent writer does not write in obedience to explicit rules as much as he follows his own intuitive sense of what seems fit. Even if further research into the linguistics of literacy can manage to make explicit for a student many of the most important rules that are implicit for an authentically skilled writer, the writer who composed by rule rather than by ear or intuition would, no doubt, bear the same resemblance to an authentic writer as Steve Martin's comic version of an immigrant Slovak-American swinger bears to John Travolta.

The counter-argument here is that we are inclined to become what we

pretend to be. It seems plausible to assume that the writer who writes by rule will, after a while, begin to internalize those rules and so eventually come to write by intuition -- to become, in other words, an authentic writer. This may be the case in some spheres of activity where mechanical processes are involved and almost all learning takes place as the result of direct instruction rather than acquisition. One first learns to drive a car by rule, then finds out how to do so by feel. Such a progression, however, is the opposite of the way we learn language skills. In the development of language skills, tacit learning precedes explicit and skills develop as a result of practice; they are not learned prior to it. Explicit rules do little more than describe or provide explanatory models of purely academic value to account for the underlying principles which appear to govern our intuitive behavior.

We learn to speak and understand language largely by trying to -- by trying to solve the problems we actually encounter in language use. We acquire our linguistic competence, moreover, without being conscious of the fact that we have been doing it. That is, every child constructs an interior model or set of rules for his language without being aware of the fact that his verbal behavior is in any sense rule-governed. To intervene in this process of intuitive learning is perilous and almost inevitably counterproductive.

The hidden rules governing many forms of complex behavior may be so subtle and so much a part of a larger gestalt that any attempt to anatomize them or teach them in a codified form may actually interfere with a learner's competence to perform the more complex act we are presuming to teach

him.[13] Often when we become self-conscious of the rules we ought to be following in the performance of an action we are intuitively competent to perform unselfconsciously, our self-consciousness can sabotoge our competence. Self-consciousness is in this sense an obstruction to consciousness and an obstacle to competence. This seems true not only in activities we tend to think of as non-intellectual and natural like breathing and sex, but in all actions we perform more through grace than will.

When we activate our linguistic competence as speakers or writers, we exercise our will mostly in the service of the relaxation of the will. Eloquence is a gift of grace. From the exercise of mere will we get the obsessive repetitions of the neurotic, the explosive utterances of the autistic child, the lop-sided language of the aphasic, or the lesser pathologies of mumbling, stuttering, droning or posturing.

Hirsch might argue, of course, that none of what I have been saying about how instruction can interfere with intuitive competence is relevant to the problems of teaching composition because written speech differs from oral precisely because it calls for the exercise of skills that are not part of any native speaker's intuitively acquired repertoire. The most distinctive feature of written speech, he insists, is its "privative" character whereby the contexts and persons actually present in ordinary oral speech transactions are in written speech absent. The writer must compensate for their absence by creating implied contexts and implied persons. "This eccentricity of written speech," says Hirsch, "creates problems which cannot be solved by the ablest of native speakers without practice and instruction. That is why one needs to be <u>taught</u> composition in one's own native language" (p. 31).

Hirsch emphasizes the word "taught," no doubt, to point out to us that we must not think of competence in written speech as learned, as it were, naturally, the way oral speech competence is acquired intuitively and without direct instruction, merely as a consequence of growing up in a speech community. Yet nothing Hirsch says about the distinctive features of written speech requires us to think that competence in writing is acquired any less intuitively or indirectly than oral language skill. To say that written speech requires practice and the use of conventions that are different from those used in oral speech is to say no more about written speech than one might say about any particular speech act or skill a native speaker acquires without direct instruction.

All speech acts are conventional and must be learned, and none is different in kind from the ones necessitated by the special constraints of written speech. What could be more conventional than the rules a child must have learned to know how to give or receive a promise or nullify the force of one with words or gestures (crossing his heart or his fingers, for example)? Any child who has learned to read (and many do so without direct instruction) has thereby demonstrated his mastery of the conventions that inform written speech in the same way a child who understands oral speech may be said to possess the linguistic competence necessary for producing speech. As a general rule in language acquisition, receptive or passive competence proceeds productive or active, with occasions for practice leading from one to the other. I see no reason why the same learning sequence would not apply to reading and writing for every child in a literate society.

It would seem, in fact, that every movement from stage to stage in the process of a child's acquisition of language is analogous to the problem of learning to use written speech. All children move from the context-rich utterances of holophrastic speech (age 12-18 mos., when single-word utterances stand for various complex relational statements whose meaning is apparent through the situation and the baby's actions) to a more context-free telegraphic speech, to even more complex patterns of speech that are less and less dependent on visual and situational contexts for their meaning.[14] Even the problem of learning to speak on the telephone, which nearly all children manage without much explicit instruction, involves learning to employ language cues and special telephone conventions to compensate for missing visual cues.

That children do learn the conventions of written speech quite as naturally as they learn oral speech is also evident in the capacity of even pre-literate children to employ a distinctive and appropriate narrative style in telling stories -- a style the first function of which is to provide through literary conventions a situational context and implied identities for the speaker and audience. Ask any child to tell you what happened to Little Red Riding Hood and he'll tell you the major events of her tale. But ask him to tell you the <u>story</u> and he will switch his discourse to a narrative style whose conventions he has come to know intuitively: "Once upon a time, there was a little girl ...".[15]

Increasingly, linguists are finding that the grammar of sentences, the grammar that every child has substantially learned by the time he enters school, is determined by considerations that are extra-sentential -- that sentences are governed by larger discoursive rules having to do with contexts

and presuppositions and such questions as whether a speaker is talking about old or new information. None of the linguistic or intellectual demands written speech makes on children is different in kind or in degree from those every child learns to meet through engaging in ordinary discourse in his native language. They are simply additional demands.

Linguistic research, it seems to me, continually provides us with two related lessons about language learning that ought to have a direct bearing on our attitudes toward any proposals for the improvement of instruction in language skills. First, every advance in scientific knowledge about human language suggests that the phenomenon of speech is even more complex and further beyond the current ability of linguists to analyze and account for than had previously been imagined. Second, as science grows in respect for the complexity of the phenomenon of speech, we are reminded anew of how the feat of language learning, which is accomplished by every child without direct instruction, professional help, or fear of failure, is an even more remarkable intellectual achievement than we had thought it to be. In other words, we continually discover how puny the best scientific efforts have been at recovering as explicit knowledge that tacit knowledge which every native speaker of a language intuitively masters.

Perhaps the most sensible conclusions we can draw from these lessons is that we ought to put a lot less trust in our capacity to teach and a lot more trust in the capacity of our students to learn language skills. From this it also follows that our research in composition ought not to be devoted as much to unconvering the linguistic rules of written speech -- even if they seem to be the rules that competent writers follow intuitively in

revising prose -- as to discovering what sorts of social, psychological, and discoursive situations contribute most to the natural development of a student's writing skills.

Finally, when it comes to instruction, the same reasoning obliges us to give our energy not to the teaching of rules or even their applications, but to the creation of contexts in which students will have the best chance to acquire and develop the kinds of verbal skills which even the most carefully constructed sets of rules can only imperfectly schematize.

FOOTNOTES

1. A similar impulse led him in Validity in Interpretation, (Yale, 1967), to try to locate the source of authoritative knowledge about the meaning of a literary text in the intentions of the text's author. His fundamental premise was that unless interpretation is directed to recovering an author's intended meaning, meaning itself must be regarded as indeterminate and the enterprise of interpretation reduced to an intellectually absurd discipline with no normative principles for judging the validity of any reader's interpretative claims.

2. See Janet Emig, The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders (NCTE Research Report No. 13, 1971) and James Britton, et al., The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18), British Schools Council Research Study (London: Macmillan 1975).

3. Wallace Douglas in an incisive review of Hirsch's book shows how Hirsch distorts Bloomfield's position: College English, 40 (Sept. 1978), 90-99.

4. The Philosophy of Rhetoric (Oxford, 1936), p. 8.

5. W. Ross Winterowd refers to "reformulation" as "a constant process, part of the generative nature of the act of writing." Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Readings (N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1975), p. 35.

6. Development of Writing Abilities, pp. 7-8.

7. See Macrorie, Telling Writing (N.Y.: Hayden, 1970) and his other books; and Elbow, Writing Without Teachers (N.Y.: Oxford U. Press, 1973).

8. "Not Back to the Pedagogenic Basics," CCC XXVII (Oct. 1976), 264-67.

9. Stoen, "Stuttering Pencils," (E.J. 65 (Nov. 1976), 40-41.

10. By teaching composition as a humane discipline within a school or college, we are thereby stipulating for it a universe of discourse in which all compositions have an underlying function which takes precedence over others in whatever hierarchy of functions is otherwise operative for any piece of discourse. For

current discourse theory with respect to composition see James Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971) and Britton, op.cit., pp. 74-87.

11. In the works of J.L. Austin, J.R. Searle, and others.

12. I hope it is evident that while I am talking about ethos, I am not talking about it in anything like the way the term is used in the Aristotelian rhetorical tradition--as a dimension of style that adds to a speaker's credibility with his audience. I am talking instead about a writer's relationship to himself and to his own actions.

13. See Michael Polanyi, The Tacit Dimension (N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1966).

14. See David McNeill, "The Pattern of Early Speech," in Current Topics in Language, ed. Nancy A. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Publishers, 1976), pp. 54-62.

15. See Bradford Arthur, Teaching English to Speakers of English (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973), pp. 57-76.